

**Ernesto Pujol at
Ramis Barquet and
Linda Kirkland**

In the 10 years that Ernesto Pujol has exhibited his multimediu work, he has explored how masculinity is constructed as well as notions of exile, ethnicity and memory. In two recent exhibitions he considered related issues of faith, gender and Anglo-Saxon "whiteness," but with a new medium—photography—and a new profundity.

In the 12 color photos from the ongoing series "Hagiography," shown at Ramis Barquet, Pujol masquerades as a female saint wearing minimalist-looking clerical garb, either the all-white habit of a novice or the black-and-white habit of a nun. Against the incongruous backdrop of a white-washed Puritan church, he assumes a variety of poses and gestures associated with piety. In *Motions: The Nun #3*, he is seated on a bench with hands folded in his lap, looking out toward the viewer with serene indifference. In *Veiled Novice*, Pujol is again seated on a bench. A veil conceals the upper half of the face, exposing his stubbly, unmistakably masculine chin below.

This new body of work was inspired by the photographic portraits of a French nun, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, which were made in the late 1890s by Sister Geneviève of the Holy Face. However, there is also a strong autobiographical element. Pujol was educated in Puerto Rico by European missionary nuns and later spent four years as a cloistered monk, wearing a black and white habit of his own and observing the daily rituals of the order. Even as Pujol parodies religious decorum, its stiff mannerisms and gender assumptions, he also acknowledges its power from an unabashedly personal perspective.

In the show "Whiteness," at Linda Kirkland, Pujol deconstructs that color and all its interrelated connotations of purity, innocence, cleanliness and so on. The conceptually integrated exhibition included 11 color photographs depicting seemingly straightforward domestic still lifes, e.g., white vintage plates and white boots atop a white faux-Victorian mantelpiece. The wooden mantel itself was also shown in the gallery, as was an antique vitrine containing actual plates. A printed and framed text,

Ernesto Pujol: *Veiled Novice*, 1999, digital print, 60 by 36 inches; at Ramis Barquet.



written in the alluring vocabulary of bridal marketing, referred to the "whiteness of harmless little subtleties." But all is not as innocent as it seems. With closer inspection, the viewer sees that the plates shown facedown in the photos possess a swastika within their manufacturer's stamps. Suddenly the pristine whiteness implodes: this work is about ethnic cleansing and the Aryan ideal. Pujol compels the viewer to reconsider the supposed universality of whiteness and its presumed benign value.

The effect of the photographs was heightened by their placement on the gallery's immaculate but no longer neutral white walls. [*The expanded "Hagiography" series is on view at the Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City, Feb. 24-June 4, 2000.*]

—Maura Reilly